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ABSTRACT

It is argued that institutional requirements of language in use suggest a reassessment of notions of correctness, noting that description generally implies prescription. It is concluded that there are two basic kinds of correctness in English. Specific sections address the following: (1) prescription, relativism, and norms; (2) three levels of language learners (the foreign language learner, standard dialect learner, and learner of advanced writing); (3) the Society for Pure English; (4) institutionalized correctness in a language test; and (5) the meaning of the correctness argument. (JL)

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CORRECTNESS IN ENGLISH

Alan Davies

Abstract

The paper argues that institutional (and particularly gate-keeping) requirements of language in use suggest a reassessment of notions of correctness, noting that description generally implies prescription.

1. Introduction

The guardians of the English language, self-appointed letter writers[1] and broadsheet campaigners, those custodians against change, live in double jeopardy. In the first place, they are ridiculed by one another as much as by the world, and their efforts likened to the vanity of King Canute. In the second place their work is regarded as a failure, again as much by themselves as by others.

Dr Johnson's famous remark about academies comes through to us as an ironic comment on his own attempt at *ascertainment* of the lexicon of English for his dictionary:

'Academies have been instituted to guard the avenues of the language, to retain fugitives and to repulse invaders; but their vigilance and activity have been vain; sounds are too volatile and subtile for legal restraints; to enchain syllables and to lash the wind are equally the undertakings of pride, unwilling to measure its desires by its strength.' (Johnson in Bolton 1966: 151, 2)

Sir Ernest Gowers (1973) is fiercely contemptuous of the Tracts of the Society for Pure English (of which more later):

'In recent years we have seen a Society for Pure English, with leaders as eminent as Henry Bradley, Robert Bridges and Logan Pearsall Smith, inviting the support of all those who, "would preserve all the richness of differentiation in our vocabulary, its nice grammatical usage and its traditional idioms, but would oppose whatever is slipshod and careless and all blurring of hard-won distinctions, and oppose no less the tyranny of schoolmasters and grammarians, both in their pedantic conservatism and in their enforcing of new-fangled rules". But it (the Society for Pure English) is now defunct. Johnson was right, as usual' (Gowers 1973: 23, 4:)

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More dismissive than elegiac, we might feel. How odd (or is it?) that Gowers should fail to list H W Fowler's name among the leaders, even though several of Fowler's contributions to the Society for Pure English Tracts were reissued as sections of his Modern English Usage, (Fowler 1926, revised Gowers 1965), the very book Gowers was revising for his Complete Plain Words (Gowers 1954), from which I have just quoted.

Again at the end of his book Grammar and Good Taste: Reforming the American Language (1982), Dennis Baron admits:

'The early planners and reformers of American English left one common legacy for their twentieth century counterparts to ponder: an overwhelming lack of success. Their history of failure has proved to be no deterrent. Whether conservative or radical, the language planners, some ignorant of past attempts at reform, others optimistic in spite of the failure of those attempts, continue their efforts to alter our English' (1982: 239)

The question I start with in this paper is whether these views, coming as they typically do in the context of an attempt at prescription (a dictionary, a handbook of usage) really mean that the whole effort is vain or whether there are different types or levels of correctness and whether, while some correctness activity is pointless, there are others that are valid. I then consider the issue of correctness from the point of view of Applied Linguistics, which must necessarily take account of the institutional requirements of and demands on language in use. I look particularly at language tests which operate importantly as a gatekeeping device in many educational and vocational settings. I will argue that language tests must assume correctness, that this is in practice what many other linguistic activities also do. In so doing they all contribute:

i. to the view speakers take of their first or second language, and
ii. to attitudes towards the language.

In other words, the dynamic of change in language is affected by factors other than itself.

2. Prescription, relativism, norms.

First, however, I want to raise two related topics, that of the relation between prescription and description and that of relativism. It is common for linguists to make an absolute distinction between description and prescription and to reject prescription as not their concern. True, some linguists do accept that all description is necessarily a form of prescription. Haas (1982) and Jespersen

(1922), for example, make this point explicitly, but it may well be implicit in all linguistic endeavour and accepted as what descriptions entail (as with, for example, maps). The rejection then would have to do with seeing prescription as not the primary task of the linguist, the primary tasks, presumably, being theory and description.

The second topic, that of relativism, is closely connected. Prescription seems to imply some sort of choice for better or worse. Another linguistic article of belief is that there is no such thing as better or worse in language: there is no relative difference, all codes are equal. But while indeed that may be a linguistic truism (and has of course to be seen to imply 'potential') it is just not true sociolinguistically, and it is for that reason helpful right at the start of introductory sociolinguistic courses to make that point strongly to counteract various manifestations of sentimentality about the minority languages. Just as a standard language has become standardised through in part the elaboration it has undergone, so the language of wider communication has gone ahead of its peers and become more widely accessible by virture of a similar process. Sankoff indeed goes so far as to suggest that:

'language contact, prolonged bilingualism and the use of pidgins and lingua franchi, seem to lead to certain types of reduction in surface complexities of the language used.' (Sankoff 1976: 284).

I would argue that similar reduction seems to occur with the development of a dialect as a standard.

Correctness, prescription, standardisation and relativism, then all seem to come together when we consider language in institutional use. I want again as a preliminary to consider a third topic, that of norm. Renate Bartsch (1987), argues that norms are what hold communities together, that these are of various kinds (linguistic, religious, legal) and that rules of, for example, grammar are the realisations of the linguistic norms. Now this means that members of the (in our case) speech community signal their membership by observing the norms. The easiest way to do this is to follow the rules. Bartsch maintains that the typical linguistic norms include rules for the basic means of expression (the sound system), for lexis, for syntax, for texts, for semantic correctness and for pragmatics. What is interesting to us is, first, that she recognises that group differences may lead to language variety differences, each with its own norms-rules relation; second, that she includes text with the more linguistic categories thereby conflating the two branches of traditional correctness discussions.

3. Three levels and questions

I wish to expand these two dimensions to three. The three dimensions relate to three different needs in language learning, which I will simplify into those of:

1. the foreign language learner (FL)
2. the standard dialect learner (SD)
3. the learner of advanced writing (AW).

These divisions are not watertight and it is normal for there to be leakage so that the standard dialect learner is also a leaner of advanced writing and so on. It is helpful to set these three levels out in a table distinguishing the levels by different questions and answers, thus:

		Question	Answer
1.	FL	What do I do?	This is what you do
2.	SD	Which one do I choose?	That depends
3.	AW	How do I do It?	Practise this

3.1 In the case of the first level, the unmarked case is that of the foreign language learner who lacks information about language form and uses. And so there will be questions like: what is the plural of X? what is the past tense of Y? how do you form the possessive of this proper name? how do you spell X? how do you pronounce Y? These are all questions requesting information which the learner has not yet acquired. Notice that some of these questions (for example: how do you spell X?) and others (for example: does this word need a hyphen? how do I split this word if it crosses the line?) are normal questions which native speakers ask. The point is that there is a question (self motivated) and there is an answer to be found. When the foreign language learner guesses wrongly (examples 'under her voice' instead of 'under her breath'; 'he would of gone') a mistake results which is non systematic. This must be distinguished from the typical foreigner error which native speakers do not make (for example ' He asked me what is the time'). Dictionaries, thesauruses and the prescriptive grammarians like the Fowler brothers deal with problems of correctness at this first level.

3.2 In the case of the second level, (which one do I choose?) the typical case is that of the dialect L1 speaker who is acquiring a superposed standard language through (usually) education. This is, again typically, or at least most talked about, the case of the disadvantaged, the minority for whom the standard is not the home language, the Black English Vernacular speaker, the working class or long stay ethnic minority (though observe that the *new* ethnic minorities, for example Vietnamese in Australia, resemble more closely the foreign language

speaker than the dialect speaker of English.) The problem for such a learner is which variant to use and necessarily the problem arises most obviously when there is a real choice, that is after the learning of a particular Standard variant. Unlike foreign language learners whose fall-back from ignorance is their first language (L1), the dialect speaker's fall-back is randomness, uncertainty as to which variant to use, the dialect or the standard. Such uncertainty makes for social anxiety about being correct, which, notoriously, in turn makes for hypercorrection, excessive correction in the wrong place.

Let me give an example from my own speech. Through the common process of selfstigmatising, because I moved from /ku:t/ to /kaut/ then I also moved from /pu:t/ to /paut/[2], where, although neither accent is rhotic the presence of an orthographic /r/ seems to require maintenance of open vowel + length. What demonstrates the social nature of the standard/dialect confusion is the social stratification described by sociolinguists such as Labov (1972), according to which certain doublets controlled by standard and dialect speakers are socially or situationally distributed in such a way as to provide a means of group exclusion and of group identity. So what does being correct mean at this second level? Is it - as with the first level- essentially concerned with knowing, being skilled in the standard dialect? The answer is complex and not like that for the foreign language learner. For the foreign language learner there is only one way to be correct, to use the standard form. For the dialect speaker correctness either depends on situation or it requires a performance similar to the foreign language speaker's. If it depends on situation, then to be correct the learner must use the Standard or the dialect variant appropriately (example: *don't* as against *dinnae).* If it requires foreign language speaker-like performance then of course only the standard variant is correct. But that is the choice of the dialect speaker who, in behaving like the foreign language learner in this case had chosen to 'pass' as a standard speaker and to establish for her/himself that new identity. Precisely like the foreign language learner except that the foreign language has L1 settings into which s/he retires and in which s/he retains a primary identity. In choosing the standard language speaker's identity all the time the dialect speaker is much more like the special case of the ESL speaker who has no public interaction network in the L1 to fall back on for that primary identity.

Bloomfield seems to have felt that, linguistically speaking, mistakes were of no interest: 'mistakes in language are simply dialect forms carried into the standard language' (Bloomfield 1972/1970: 88). Much of L1 education in English and other languages is concerned at early stages with providing a facility in the standard dialect, spoken and written.

3.3 In the third case, that of the third level (how do I do it?), the typical case is that of the learner of advanced writing. Such a learner may, of course, be a standard speaker of the language in use for the written medium, or a dialect speaker, or a foreign language speaker. Such differences in status are not

relevant on this level for two reasons: first that the problem of manipulating the written language is the same for everyone whatever the starting point; second that the problems of correctness non specific to advanced writing skills will already have been dealt with under the two previous headings of foreign language learning and dialect-standard transfer.

For the advanced writing (AW) learner the question 'how do I do it?' is a genuine question and of all three learning states the one least like a translating match. The FL learner, like the DS learner, already has meanings encoded into the L1 or D1. Now the AW learner is certainly seeking the expression most suitable for the meaning s/he wishes to encode. That meaning must - as in the other cases - already be available to him/her. However, there does seem to be more than a joke in the aphorism that I don't know what I mean until I write it down. Writing, as Bacon said, makes a ready man, or Pope:

> True wit in writing comes from art not chance
> As those move easiest who have learned to dance.

Much of the underlying argument (criticism) about correctness is in reality about the lack of correctness in writing, better considered as a lack of precision, an inability to write what you mean, an incoherence or non clarity in the composition of prose texts, a failure to take the reader with you. These failures surely underline some of the unease about young people's use of English which is so often falsely attributed to a lack of awareness of the correct forms; in other words what is really a failure at the third level is attributed to one of the first two levels. Does that mean then, that in spite of giving it the wrong label most of the complaints about correctness in general are valid, so that, when Prince Charles complains that his staff's use of English is lamentable, it is indeed lamentable, not because (as he thinks) of their inability to spell (Level 1), but because of their lack of craftsmanship at Level 3 in composing coherent and appropriate prose?

Now if my analysis so far is accepted what it means is that the concept of correctness has shifted focus. While the complainers emphasise the correctness (lack of it) of form what really needs to be diagnosed is the incorrectness of composition/rhetoric/discourse/coherence of texts. These two, the formal and the functional, are confused and the conceptually easier, form, seized on as the source of the problem. What is overlooked is the sheer difficulty of composition, whether it is a letter, a report, or an argument. In the first place there are inequalities in ability: some compose with greater felicity than others; in the second place, and much more important, it has to be learnt and practised. The complaints about inadequacy are frequently made too early. As Bolton (1984) says: 'writing requires a great many skills, best learned, like the skills of any other subject, one at a time in some deliberate order' (218) and again that 'students study what they need to learn, not what they already know' (199). So often it is, exactly, *students* whose English is said to be incorrect. The sensible

answer Bolton offers is to agree, pointing out that that is precisely why they are students. More to the point perhaps, and certainly more fun would be to do what Sledd (1985) has done and to subject their professors to a similar analysis. But that is another story. What I would argue is that the correctness complaints need to be more clearly defined, less global, to relate more sensitively to the speaker/writer and to analyse the language failure or breakdown more satisfactorily, which means more linguistically. More precision from a Bolton is what is needed, less emotion from a John Simon who writes:

'The English language is being treated nowadays exactly as slave traders once handled the merchandise in their slave ships, or as the inmates of concentration camps were dealt with by their Nazi jailers' (Simon 1980: 97).

3.4 I return now to the question I raised earlier. Is the whole effort of language planning vain or, if there are different levels of correctness, are some correctness activities pointless while others are valid? I am ready at this point to offer three partial answers to these questions.

3.4.1 First, no: language planning of the correctness type is not vain. It is after all as Milroy and Milroy (1985) point out an important contribution towards language standardisation which Johnson and Gowers, yes and the SPE (to which I come in a moment) et al have contributed. Of course they were not fixing the language, not ascertaining it as Swift seems to have desired, in the sense of preventing further changes. Even if that is what they desired and thought they were doing (and as I said earlier the greater the effort at prescription the greater the doubt about its efficacy) what they did helped in the process of standardisation which by its nature is an activity of obsolescence, never finished, with no final product. Milroy and Milroy (1985) generously praise those who complain most shrilly about the decline of the language (the 'henny-penny' view as it has been called) on the grounds that even though their targets are trivial (such as a loss of the differential *disinterested/uninterested)* they remind us all that languages require maintenance, just like other social institutions and indeed like people.

3.4.2 Second, I argue that prescription is most effective as prescription where it comes closest to description, above all, of course, in dictionary making and pedagogical grammars. Indeed the role of pedagogy in the writing of all descriptive grammars is seriously undervalued. Where linguistics is theory bound, it is parts of a grammar, prolegomena to a description, that emerge; where linguistics becomes descriptive, a major impetus is the pedagogic, widely interpreted, the ascertaining for foreign learners, for literacy and for translation and publishing.

3.4.3 Third, I argue that correctness is helpfully seen as operating on three levels, each responding to a different question, the what do I do? the which one do I choose? and the how do I do it? (Table 1) In turn each question relates to a different status or purpose of language learning and language use. I maintain that it is imporant to keep these three levels distinct in terms of analysis while, of course, accepting that they may overlap in individual cases. I further conclude that the three levels properly reflect different types of learning with consequent different types of sanction.

3.4.3.1 The first (the *what* question) level indicates two problems for the foreign learner, the mistake of ignorance because s/he does not yet know what to do, and the error of the intervening system or interlanguage. I have suggested that the second problem is self-eradicating, as all Second Language Acquisition (SLA) studies show. The solution to the first problem depends on the foreign learner's increasing knowledge of the target language, as it does with the native speaker. The sanctions for the foreign learner are in the first instance to fail to be understood and in the second instance to be wrongly categorised, in other words to become so native-like that false expectations of status arise.

3.4.3.2 The second (the *which* question) level is placed centrally in all educational systems and points at the extreme to complaints of educational disadvantage as well as to the dilemma of loss of social identity. Unlike the *what* and the *how* questions (levels 1 and 3), this is an attitudinal question not a linguistic one.

3.4.3.3 The *how* question (level 3) is a properly linguistic question, like 1 and not like 2. The rationale for this distinction is that 1 concerns the mechanics, the forms, and 3 the combining in discourse of those forms. No 2 is educational rather than linguistic because, since the variants/options are known the right choice is attitudinal. At levels 1 and 3 the right answer is not yet known.

The following matrix brings these components together:

	Identity	Linguistic	Stylistic
Level 1	/	/	x
Level 2	/	x	/
Level 3	x	/	/

Table 2: Distinguishing Levels

Levels 1 and 2 are similar in the dilemmas they raise about identity; Levels 1 and 3 are similar in that they both concern new language skills; Levels 2 and 3 are similar in that they both relate to problems of appropriateness.

4. The Society for Pure English

I want now to comment briefly on the work of the Society for Pure English asking for our purposes what if any level of correctness most exercised the Society in its work and how useful that work was.
The Society for Pure English (SPE) was founded in Oxford in 1913 and continued until 1948. During this period it issued 66 Tracts, a term loaded with Oxford history. Whether deliberate or not there is an inevitable association with the Tractarians, the nineteenth century Oxford Movement of Anglo Catholicism. The SPE had a mission, the preservation, defence and elaboration of English. Because of the Great War, Tract 1 did not appear until 1919. It contained the SPE manifesto or 'Original Prospectus' under the names of Robert Bridges, Logan Pearsall-Smith, Walter Raleigh and Henry Bradley. As three of those names suggest the SPE was largely a concern of those involved in literature, but then so is the French Academy, to which the SPE looked with some respect. The aims of the SPE are set out in that 'Original Prospectus':

'Literary education in England (sic) would seem in one grave respect to lack efficiency, for it does not inspire writers with a due sense of responsibility towards their native speech. In most European countries men (sic) of letters, and the better class of journalists, are trained to observe the changes of the language, and to assist consciously in its development, being guided by acknowledged principles of tradition and taste. But the English language, which is now rapidly spreading over the world, is subject to no such guidance, and to very little intelligent criticism. It is therefore proposed that a few men of letters, supported by the scientific alliance of the best linguistic authorities, should form a group or free association, and agree upon a modest and practical scheme for informing popular taste on sound principles, for guiding educational authorities, and for introducing into practice certain slight modifications and advantageous changes.' (SPE 1, 1919: 5/6)

In a later Tract, written after Bridges' death, Pearsall Smith provides recollections of the founding of the SPE, commenting:
'A few of us were talking one afternoon in that home of leisurely conversation, the library of Chilswell - the date must have been somewhere in January 1913 - about the state of the English language and the dangers which seemed to be threatening it under modern conditions. How would it be possible, we asked....to safeguard our inherited form of speech from some at least of these dangers, to help defend its integrity and beauty, and make it, perhaps, into an even more adequate means of expression for modern ideas.' (SPE 35 1931: 482).
So the claim was that English lacked efficiency, writers did not have a sense of responsibility toward their native speech, it lacked intelligent criticism. It is difficult today not to find this breast-beating list of defects risible. What is being

talked about is the feelings or attitudes of the founders of the SPE: no analysis is offered, no diagnosis of the inadequacies of English which they found so obvious. What is ironic is that in the same Tract 1 the processes of organic development are praised for their past achievement but condemned for their present continuation. It is as though the SPE founders knew exactly how a language grows but were not prepared to see it continue in the same way. This is double think of the worst variety, worse even than the romantic prelapsarianism of wanting to turn the clock back to some mythic perfect state. Worse, because in spite of their realistic understanding of how English had come to be, they approach it in a self-regarding way, assuming that its future was wholly controllable - and by them! The 'Original Prospectus' of Tract 1 continues:

'The ideal of the Society is that our language in its future development should be controlled by the forces and processes which have formed it in the past; that it should keep its English character and that the new elements added to it should be in harmony with the old. The Society, therefore, will place itself in opposition to certain tendencies of modern taste; which taste it hopes gradually to modify and improve.' (SPE 1 1919: 6/7)

The means suggested by the SPE founders for controlling language development involved:

1. the systematising of word coinage,
2. encouraging local dialects, and
3. restoring the old harmonious cadencies of traditional speech.

Such a manifesto easily falls prey to the contemptuous dismissal by Gowers which I quoted above. But during its 30 odd years there was more to the SPE than this list of dilettante affectations, more realism to it too than this sense of Oxford (that home of lost causes) controlling English development which comes through from the official policy statements.
In the first place, the contributors included serious linguistic scholars. H W Fowler, O Jespersen, W A Craigie, C T Onions gave its views linguistic credibility. In the second place, there are articles describing various contact language influences on English vocabulary, on Basic, on Indian and American English and on slang. The Tracts, in other words, may have begun in a dilettante manner but the range of topics indicates the need at the time to provide for the kind of descriptions of contemporary English that for example Quirk et al's later *Survey of Modern English* was to provide through its many publications. As for my levels of correctness, however, it is Level 1 that is mainly dealt with (by Fowler and Jespersen). Level 2 has some attention, though in a not very satisfactory polemical way (for example 'The Best English, a claim for the Superiority of

Received Standard English' in Tract 39 1934) and Level 3 not really at all. Fowler himself was concerned, if not very systematically, with correctness questions at this level, as comes through in his *Modern English Usage* of 1926 and even more in the developments of Fowler in, for example, Gowers (1954). But on the whole, no, that most important level is not one which the academies and the societies see as a language problem; for them it is wholly literary.
It is not.

5. Institutionalised correctness in a language test

In my Introduction to this paper, I referred to the importance of correctness views in institutional interventions on language in society and gave particular mention to the role of language tests. I turn now to this topic.
I will take as my example a current English Foreign language proficiency test, known as the Oxford-ARELS Examination in EFL. The Rationale for the test explains that it meets 'a need for practical and non-literary writing and reading tests aimed at non-literary students and based on authentic tasks. The aim is to test what teachers believe should be taught and not to divorce the structure of the tests from what happens in the classroom.' (Rationale, Oxford Delegacy and ARELS 1989).
I want to cite three parts of the test, all for the Higher Level version. This level, we are told, 'aims to determine whether students at an Advanced Upper or Intermediate stage would thrive in an English speaking environment, for example, in an international office or living in an English-speaking country.' (Information Leaflet 1989).

5.1 My first example comes from Section 4 of the Higher Spoken English Test (No 41). In this Section the candidate's understanding of a spoken text is tested. The spoken text consists of an interview with a gamekeeper and the test consists of comprehension questions to which the candidate must provide a spoken response which is taped for later scoring. Here is an excerpt just after the start of the interview (the questions are omitted):

Interviewer:
'Why are crossbows popular with the poachers?'

Gamekeeper:
'Unfortunately, it's not the most accurate of things, but er, it certainly kills deer. Unfortunately from the deer's point of view, it doesn't kill them that well, you know, so there's a lot of deer running round with arrows in them. And, er, a friend of ours on the other side of the estate found one that had been running for at least three days with an arrow in it, and they never did catch up with it, you know, so that's gone to die somewhere.'

Interviewer:

But poaching has been a good country game, hasn't it? Is it getting worse?'

Gamekeeper:

'Er, as to 'good country game', I suppose back in the eighteen hundreds when, er, people were on very low wages, it was a good way of, you know, providing food for the family, but I'm afraid that really is no longer the case. This is just out and out theft. It's big money.'

What this excerpt illustrates is that the sample of spoken English offered to candidates at an advanced level is quite unlike real spoken English in spite of the protestations about authenticity. The text is a good example of what Abercrombie (1965) calls 'spoken prose.' There are, it is true, a number of filled hesitations inserted in the Gamekeeper's turns but they do no more, I suggest, than indicate that this is pretending to be speech. In fact it is a text read aloud. No harm in that, as I shall point out later, but what I draw attention to here is the corrected idealised nature of the offered stimuli. What the candidates must respond to is a very correct - and quite unnatural form of spoken English, essentially written English read aloud.

5.2 My second example is from Section 12 of the same test. Here what is being tested is spoken everyday language. The candidate hears various everyday remarks and is required to respond with a suitable comment. Here are three of the remarks the candidate hears:

1. 'I think I left my cigarette lighter at your place last night. Have you seen it?'
2. 'I'm trying to get myself a new flat, and I need some people to give me a reference. Could I give your name?'
6. 'I'd like to get in touch with you some time next week. How could I contact you?'

The message I want to point to here is the dialect sampled for the test. It is only too obvious that it is Standard English in one or other of its spoken accents. And notice that here the test is not meant to be illustrating the written language where standard English would be unremarkable. No, it is the spoken language that is being tested and the dialect selected is the standard dialect. Indeed, it is unremarkable that the language of the test should be, even for the spoken language, Standard English. Once again, we can see that what the candidate is required to understand even in the spoken language is the 'correct', homogenised, semi-idealised dialect of Standard English. Again, with good reason as I explain shortly.

5.3 My third example comes from the Writing section of the test (Higher Paper 1, June 1989). In this question the candidate is provided with a letter from a pen-friend, herself an English learner. The candidate's instructions are:

'A pen-friend of yours is interested in taking a temporary job in Norway. She has written a letter of application and has asked you to check it. You have read the letter and have decided that it is easier to rewrite it completely than to correct individual mistakes. Do so, also making any alterations to letter layout and organization you feel appropriate.'

Here is the first part of the letter text:

'Dear sirs,
I am kindly requesting you to make it possible by your mediation, to get a job in Norway in 1989 year. I am interested in work at Agriculture (picking up strawberries and other fruits, helping on farm), doing babysitting. I am also room-painter, I can cover walls with wallpaper and do other things of that kind.'

Now what is required here is of course correction because the letter contains a number of mistakes. But the mistakes are all of the Level 1 kind of the taxonomy I offered earlier. They are not serious problems of the Level 3 (Advanced Writing) kind, because the meaning intended by the original writer of the letter is clear: what holds it up is mistakes of form: 'kindly, mediation, 1989 year, at Agriculture, picking up strawberries, fruits, helping on farm, doing babysitting(?) I am room painter, cover walls, other things...' These are all straightforwardly correctable but such correction gives no indication of whether a candidate can compose a coherent text. Of course there are other writing questions in this test including two requiring open ended compositions. But my point is not that the test is somehow incomplete; rather I am concerned with the sampling of English offered.

5.4 In all three cases, I submit, there is restriction, homogenisation, idealisation; in the first two 'correct' English of two different kinds is illustrated; in the third while some examples of mistake are presented, these are at the expense of (indeed in lieu of) the serious type of incorrectness at my Level 3, that of lack of coherence in writing.
At the same time all three offer satisfactory samples of Standard English, samples which indicate the real model to be aimed at by the learner, samples also which are testable in the ways that my three levels of correctness all reduce to. They are all about the standard language, its difference from a foreign language, from a non standard dialect, from non coherent text. That is what all tests of English necessarily test because those are the proper goals aimed at in all social institutional settings, above all in education.

In so doing, pace the SPE, it is not the case that:

1. language change is curtailed;
2. the language becomes less flexible and resourceful; it may lose geographical variation but it gains professional and social variety.

Furthermore there is a sense in which the increasing impact of the standard as the one educational model itself acts as a drive on structural development. This is particularly the case where the responsibility for carrying the language forward lies with second language users, as is increasingly the case for example with Welsh, where we may predict the early loss of lenition for that very reason of non useful redundancy.

6. The meaning of the correctness argument

We are now is a position to review what the correctness arguments are really about. There are, I suggest two basic kinds and it is useful to keep them apart, even though they often overlap. The first is that of correctness as part of the standardising process, my Level 1 and the approach of the serious prescriptivists. The second is that of the complaints lobby, those who talk about the death of the language and who typically focus on the table manners aspect of language use, the choice of the wrong fork or in this case the 'wrong' variant. A typical example is that of Simon who writes: 'If you continue to use *between you and I* instead of *between you and me* there will soon be no more communication between you and me' (1980: 21). The concentration of the complainers on items such as these suggests their concern with what I have called Level 2 (the Dialect-Standard distinction). Once again there is here concern with standardisation. Or so it seems.

I would rather argue that the complainers are, when they are not simply bewailing loss of the past, really talking about Level 3, an inefficiency in advanced writing. Their blaming this on the wrong choice in a finite set of well known paired choices in English (for example *owing to/due to),* which are often indicators of social insecurity leading to hypercorrection, simply means that they themselves are unable to be analytical about language. It also makes gatekeeping very much easier because it reduces fine discrimination among writing styles to a set of binary black and white choices. No doubt these are meant to be only symbols of elaborate skills but as with all such social conventions they can lose the sense of what they symbolise and come to stand for nothing but themselves, secret cabalistic indicators of good breeding or, in the case of language correctness, of good grammar.

The SPE founders contained both complainers and prescriptivists but even the complainers had the good sense to see beyond these symbols. In my view it was the inadequacy in advanced writing which the SPE manifesto was really talking about. And that is not a new problem or one that will go away. The need for that type of correctness is an enduring one; it is a fundamental problem of language learning and has to be learnt afresh in every generation..

Notes

1 For example: 'It is bad enough that some of our news readers and radio announcers cannot pronounce Antartic but when a man who aspires to become our next Prime Minister fails to pronounce it correctly what hope have we for his aspirations to improve the educational standard of the populace in this, The Year of Literacy?' The Australian (Letters) 20.3. 1990.

2 Orthographically: court/coat; port

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